

Appendix III d

Swale Borough Council Local Plan Review

Minutes of Rural Communities Workshop Discussion

Committee Room, Swale House, Wednesday 04 July 2018

Organisations Represented:

Swale Borough Council	Rural Kent
Cllr Gerry Lewin	Kent Downs AONB Unit
Eastchurch Parish Council	Cllr Nicholas Hampshire
The Campaign to Protect Rural England	Cllr James Hunt
English Rural Housing Association	Diocese of Canterbury
Kent County Council	Produced in Kent Ltd
Action with Communities in Rural Kent	

1. Introduction

Swale BC gave an introduction to the current Local Plan review and advised that a separate rural settlement study will be taking place to feed into this.

2. Overview of rural communities in Swale

Swale BC noted that approximately 40% of the Borough's population live in rural areas and 23% of the land area falls within the AONB. Therefore, consideration of our rural communities will be an important issue for the next Local Plan. Agriculture (including fruit production) is strong here with the 2nd largest agricultural workforce in Kent making a contribution to the UK's foody supply. This will need to keep pace with issues such as climate change and Brexit. Wine making is an increasing opportunity in Kent. There are pockets of deprivation, poor environments and some rural services are in decline. Is the vision with the current Local Plan going to remain relevant for the rural communities? There are many small businesses which contribute to an important rural economy, however with the growth of digital and home working; rural broadband connection is an issue. We have a significant woodland resource for leisure, woodland management and forest schools. Where do we get the most up to date demographic statistics for rural areas? CPRE advised that a recent report might help and that this can be sent over to Swale BC. How can all of this be dealt with through policy?

3. Local Plan review, future growth and strategic discussion

Swale BC introduced the reasons for the current Local Plan review taking place and explained the new NPPF would likely significantly increase the housing need for the Borough. Is the 20 year old settlement strategy going to be sustainable for the future? It has for example resulted in more services and facilities at Iwade, but it took a lot of housing to achieve that. Other villages which have seen smaller growth have not received additional facilities.

One potential new settlement strategy could be new settlements and a consultation has been carried out to gauge the appetite for this. The submissions are going through assessment at the moment and will go to Members for a steer next year.

KCC Highways & Transportation noted that dispersed growth doesn't provide sufficient investment to make improvements to the transport. Eastchurch Parish Council raised concern that infrastructure always seems to follow housing growth and that new settlements may facilitate this better. The CPRE noted that the Brownfield Land Register should be used to ensure brownfield sites are the focus to begin with.

The English Rural Housing Association commented that parishes are keen on affordable housing and that the protection of villages from development is not viable. There is a need for downsizing. Windfall sites are useful. A development has recently been approved for a mixture of local and open market housing and this is supported by parish councils.

KCC Education commented that there is a difficult balance. Dispersed growth makes it difficult to address education needs and it is often hard/impossible to expand rural schools. On the other hand, a new community would need to be able to forward fund the provision of new schools.

Cllr Hampshire considered that the current approach is not working and that we are still playing catch up following the recession some 10+ years ago. Faversham has been protected for some time but has the capacity to be opened up, especially considering that infrastructure improvements are only just starting to be planned in the Sittingbourne area. Swale is a commuter area with many people living, but not working here. This needs to be considered transport wise – Sittingbourne is in the top 10 areas for London commuting. The Diocese of Canterbury commented that infrastructure issues are already present and that once land is built over, it is gone forever.

SBC commented that affordable housing is most required in areas where it is the least viable and this is a big issue. Concern was raised that we are building housing for people who can't afford them.

4. What role should rural settlements play in meeting future development needs in Swale?

Cllr Hampshire commented that villages are not saying no to any development and parish councils would like to see 10 or 20 affordable homes built for local people. However, the fear is that the Borough Council would then add more housing on top of this. There are no small developers. SBC commented that a good technical exercise needs to take place to differentiate the capacity between different settlements. Medium sized villages could benefit from good quality development – quality is just as important as quantity. We need to get the right SPD in place around design.

The CPRE asked how many applications we get for rural exceptions housing and said that more needs to be done around assessing need. SBC countered that we do look at needs and carry out site walkabouts etc., but then the process stops – why is this? Rural exceptions have provided thousands of houses nationally but it is a slower process and needs a strong will from parish councils. Some have it but find it hard to take the objections. Many people who don't qualify for affordable housing also can't afford open market housing.

Rural Kent noted that everything is ready for house building except for the land – there is a supply issue which requires Government led action.

Cllr Lewin commented that this is an important question because there are so many rural communities here. Many were untouched by the last Local Plan. For those not seeing development there is a need to assess local housing needs. More elderly housing, starter homes and disability adapted housing is required. Future policy should reflect that demand. Eastchurch PC raised concern that bungalows are disappearing and there needs to be planning action on this because people can't find the bungalows they need, with the costs rising simultaneously. This is a big challenge in villages.

Cllr Hampshire raised the prospect of having more apartment style builds with car parks underneath which are less land hungry. English Rural Housing Association said that there are lots of villages with few or no facilities. It's the people that make places sustainable. There can be very few facilities but the community is often strong. 99% have a village hall. It is not necessarily about providing services. Cllr Hampshire noted that if you swamp villages with housing, it's the people that stop the community spirit.

SBC commented that is it not just about sustainability in a social manner, but also environmentally. For example, we don't want everyone having to drive everywhere. How can we use town planning to make the future better and get development working for us? This is required of us by the NPPF.

Rural Kent noted that super-fast broadband needs to be rolled out across rural areas, which is not happening at the moment. The ever growing online based economy is struggling to take place in villages. However, it is about the community first. Broadband could form a policy although Swale noted that KCC already has a project for urban and rural broadband.

Should we be looking at social care co-operatives to support the elderly population in rural areas? KCC considered that we need to be talking about health care when discussing new settlements. We have an active role in health but are not thinking about it spatially at the moment. We need to build healthier communities.

Cllr Lewin noted that positive planning policies are needed to re-inforce the community feeling in villages. They are often seen as idyllic places but suffer many problems in terms of infrastructure, employment etc. How can the Local Plan support this?

Cllr Hampshire raised the issue of town centres and how these may look in 10 years. There will be a lot of vacant retail space. We could create much higher/denser built centres. Secure internet is just as important as high speed. There was mention of the insufficient parking standards.

The Diocese said that overall, the next 5-10 years presents a big unknown. Work patterns are changing and there is a need for 500 rural GPs in Kent. Also, we are becoming significantly under resourced in fruit pickers. Some areas are already deciding which orchards are not going to be picked.

SBC officers noted that employment creation is going to be lower due to automation. The issue of possibly being asked to take housing from neighbouring authorities was raised; however SBC said that at this time, nobody is indicating that this will happen.

5. Round table of any final points

Cllr Lewin concluded that many of the key issues are not within our remit but that we need to focus on local needs housing, changing demographics and the population's requirements. The CPRE concluded that they would continue to lobby the Government on what they consider to be the key issues. Rural Kent raised the issue of local authority resourcing in having to deal with these issues. SBC confirmed that there would be a community housing fund starting soon. English Rural Housing Association and the Kent Downs AONB concluded that we should keep the rural exceptions policy because it does work. Sevenoaks has a robust one and it works very well. There was a final discussion around the critical role of design in creating a distinct design in villages. Cllr Hampshire concluded that rural areas do not have the capacity to take so much development and that a new strategy is required.